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Chair

The Honourable Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC)): Good afternoon, colleagues.

This is meeting number 102 of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for Tuesday, June 5, 2018.

We are here today in consideration of "Report 7, Consular Service to Canadians Abroad—Global Affairs Canada", of the 2018 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

We have with us this afternoon, from the Office of the Auditor General, Mr. Michael Ferguson, Auditor General of Canada; and Ms. Carol McCalla, principal. From the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we have Mr. Ian Shugart, deputy minister of foreign affairs; and Ms. Heather Jeffrey, assistant deputy minister, consular, emergency management, and security.

We'll turn the time over to our Auditor General first, then we'll hear from the department, and then we'll go into the first rounds of questioning.

Welcome, Mr. Ferguson.

Mr. Michael Ferguson (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on consular services to Canadians abroad.

This audit examined how Global Affairs Canada responded to requests for consular assistance from Canadians travelling or living abroad. Canadians requested things like help during an international crisis such as a natural disaster, new travel documents to replace lost or stolen passports, or even assistance because they had been arrested or detained abroad.

[*English*]

We found that Global Affairs Canada was able to deploy staff quickly to help Canadians during a crisis in a foreign country and that it updated its online travel advisories as crises evolved. We also found that the department was able to issue urgent travel documents quickly through its missions abroad.

However, we found that in about two-thirds of the cases we examined involving a Canadian arrested or detained abroad, consular officers hadn't contacted the detained Canadian within 24 hours of being notified, as required. Consular officers were able to contact most of these individuals within a month, but some were never contacted. When a consular officer did contact a Canadian arrested or detained abroad, it was usually by email or telephone and not in person. In-person contact is important for assessing the well-being of individuals and determining how much help they need.

Significantly, we found that Global Affairs Canada took too long to assess allegations of the possible mistreatment or torture of Canadians detained abroad.

[*Translation*]

In 2004, Justice Dennis O'Connor investigated the actions of Canadian officials in relation to the arrest and detention of Maher Arar. In his report, Justice O'Connor recommended that Global Affairs Canada train its staff to identify signs of torture and mistreatment, and inform the minister quickly of those cases.

We found that, more than a decade later, Global Affairs Canada's approach to cases of arrest and detention was still not sufficient. The department provided its consular officers with only general training on how to conduct prison visits and how to identify signs that torture or mistreatment had occurred. Also, we found that, in one case, the department took seven months to inform the minister about the likely torture of a detained Canadian.

These gaps are critical for Canadians in distress. Global Affairs Canada must ensure that its consular officers are properly prepared and supported to help Canadians arrested or detained abroad.

● (1535)

[*English*]

When we looked at the level of service provided by missions abroad, we found inconsistent performance. For example, four of the 10 highest volume missions didn't meet their performance targets for the timely delivery of regular passports. Also, Global Affairs Canada didn't allocate its resources to adjust to varying workloads at its missions to ensure an effective and consistent level of service.

Finally, we found that Global Affairs Canada didn't track the performance of most of its consular services because of poor data quality. This lack of tracking made it difficult for the department to know whether it was deploying its staff in a way that best delivered the services that the government had promised to Canadians travelling or living abroad.

We made seven recommendations and Global Affairs Canada agreed with all of them.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ferguson.

We'll now move to Mr. Shugart, please.

Mr. Ian Shugart (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair. In a strange sort of way, it's always a pleasure for me to come to public accounts.

I want to thank the Office of the Auditor General for this important audit, which, as always, will enable us to improve our consular services to Canadians.

As deputy minister, I also want to convey my profound respect and gratitude to consular officers at headquarters and in missions around the world for the dedication, the compassion, and the competence that they exercise on behalf of Canadians.

Let me give you, to begin, some contextual data that will shed light on how Global Affairs Canada provides consular services to Canadians abroad.

[*Translation*]

Travelling has become easier and more affordable, and communication almost instantaneous. As a result, Canadians are vacationing, working, studying, retiring and simply living abroad in ever greater numbers. An estimated 2.8 million Canadians currently live outside Canada, and Canadians made almost 52 million trips abroad in 2016—an increase of approximately 4% from 10 years ago.

Global Affairs Canada manages a network of 260 points of service around the world, and there are more than 800 officials either wholly or partially responsible for providing consular service. For Global Affairs Canada, serving Canadians abroad is a major function of the department.

[*English*]

Consular work has a wide variety of functions. It includes issues as varied as providing travel information about foreign countries to help Canadians make safer and smarter travel decisions, visiting Canadians detained abroad, assisting with the identification and repatriation of deceased Canadians, and seeking clemency for the death penalty of Canadians detained abroad and under that prospect. We also provide services on behalf of other government departments, such as processing of applications for passports or for citizenship certificates, which are proof of citizenship.

We have seen an increase in requests for consular assistance by Canadians abroad. Consular officers opened over 277,000 new consular cases in 2017, an increase of 4% over the number of cases in 2016.

The majority, about 98%, of cases are of a routine or administrative nature and are typically resolved quickly and directly at the diplomatic mission. The remaining 2%—that's roughly 6,000 cases every year—require complex interactions involving intensive engagement with local authorities and host governments.

At the heart of every consular case is a personal situation involving a Canadian citizen abroad and a network of consular officials who are ready and proud to help. I can assure you, members of the committee and Mr. Chair, that we make every effort to contact our citizens who are arrested or detained abroad as soon as we are informed.

Frequently, challenges with access and difficult local contexts must be overcome. We are always looking for ways to improve. To ensure this, we will be putting additional training in place and introducing new tools to improve monitoring and service delivery.

We recognize the need for targeted training for consular officers to allow them to calibrate their response in light of the different operating environments in which they work, sometimes with multiple police forces, immigration officials, prison authorities, and regional and provincial governments, as well as the specific context of each case.

These responses can put consular officers in difficult situations, and we are committed to ensuring their safety and that of the Canadians they are assisting. We have already piloted enhanced training in regard to the safe conduct of prison visits, and we will extend this to all consular officers.

● (1540)

We have also begun the process of modernizing our case management information systems, which will further enhance the quality control and monitoring capabilities, improve our data quality, and reinforce the application of consistent service standards and the documentation of these efforts—all issues to which the Auditor General has just referred.

Global Affairs Canada takes allegations of mistreatment or torture of Canadians detained abroad very seriously, and we consistently take immediate steps to address such allegations. We are pleased that the report found that in all cases of such allegations consular officials at missions abroad took immediate and direct action on the ground to respond to these situations and advocate for the safety and well-being of Canadians.

We can do better. In line with the findings, we are taking additional steps to ensure that ministers are promptly notified in writing at the onset, when allegations of mistreatment or torture are first made, as well as when sufficient information is available to ascertain if they are founded.

Global Affairs Canada is always looking for ways to improve Canada's consular services with the objective to best serve the needs of Canadians abroad. This is a constant process of improvement, based notably on the experience of our consular officers, the feedback of clients, and our analysis of trends.

[*Translation*]

Passport services are another example of this trend.

For example, in the year following the implementation of the Electronic Travel Authorization, the eTA, requirements, many Canadians resident abroad needed to acquire Canadian passports. As a result, affected missions abroad experienced a 23% increase in all passport application volumes, a 47% increase in proof of citizenship application volumes, and a 70% increase in new passport applications.

In 2017, Global Affairs Canada opened over 200,000 new cases for passport services.

[*English*]

While the majority, almost 90%, met service standards, some missions could not respond to the significant surge. Additional resourcing has now been put in place to ensure that demand can be met to address the backlog, and we have improved the agility of our resourcing system.

We recognize the importance of ensuring appropriate oversight and monitoring of passport delivery services, and we strive to deliver high-quality, efficient passport services to continue to meet the needs of Canadians abroad. We're constantly re-evaluating and improving the way we work. With a view to improving consular service standards overall, we have begun reviewing the resource allocation methodology to ensure that the distribution of resources responds to trends and is optimized across the mission network to continue to ensure an effective, consistent level of service abroad.

We're pleased that the Auditor General recognized the department for its successful consular assistance during international crises, including promptly updating our online travel advisories so that Canadians have access to the information they need to make smart travel choices. Expert staff is ready to assist Canadians who require assistance abroad. This includes the support of the emergency watch and response centre, which deals with calls on a 24-7 basis from around the world, and a standard rapid deployment team made up of specially trained experienced officials ready to deploy on hours' notice to anywhere they are needed.

This team helped Canadians during the serious earthquake in Nepal in 2015 and were on the ground in the fall of 2017 across the Caribbean during hurricanes Irma and Maria, where they were instrumental in supplementing our local responses.

● (1545)

We already recognize the important role of lessons-learned reports in continually improving emergency response for Canadians following a significant emergency event requiring activation of our emergency response team. This is why we're currently developing a standardized department-wide approach to ensure lessons learned are more consistently captured, assessed, and implemented across different types of emergencies.

[*Translation*]

Global Affairs Canada has already started to provide targeted advice to Canadians, with its external communications plan, in order to extend its reach through additional targeted briefings and outreach.

We have conducted public opinion research with Canadian travellers to better understand their preparations for travel, the information they need and their expectations of consular services, as well as the channels they use to access such information. We know that Canada's efforts to strengthen ties with the world—through study and international business linkages, for example—mean that demand will continue to increase for consular services.

[*English*]

We are committed to providing professional, agile, timely, and dedicated consular services to meet this growing demand and modernize the consular program. Over the coming months, we plan to improve communications to equip Canadians to better prepare for travel and help keep them safer abroad; to provide timely, appropriate, and professional assistance to Canadians when they most need our help, in line with our service standards; to continue to modernize the consular digital platform; to strengthen support to our network of consular officials to ensure they have the necessary tools and training for modern consular service delivery; and to leverage bilateral engagements and seek partnerships to serve Canadians better.

I can assure you that we remain firmly committed to supporting Canadians abroad—we know there are few issues more important to parliamentarians than this—and to providing timely and appropriate consular services.

[*Translation*]

I would like to thank the honourable members of the committee for their attention.

My colleague Heather Jeffrey and I are available to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Shugart and Mr. Ferguson. I think today's subject is of a lot of interest to a lot of our members of Parliament because most members of Parliament have received that call either from a parent or from someone in another country. I'm sure you're going to face some good questions today.

The first person we're going to turn to is our vice-chair, Ms. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, all of you.

It is always a very interesting subject as all of us have constituents who, one way or another, need consular services abroad. I join Mr. Shugart in congratulating our consular services for their exemplary performance of duties. I think we have perhaps one of the best consular services in the world. I thank Mr. Ferguson and his team for pointing out what's lacking. Our Prime Minister is so fond of saying that we can always do better.

One thing that struck me in your report, Mr. Ferguson—and honest to God it was a surprise for me—is that in 7.4 of the report you state, "The level of consular assistance that Canada provides at its missions abroad is discretionary—that is, it's not mandated by legislation." I wonder if either you, Mr. Shugart, or you, Mr. Ferguson, find this to be a weakness of our consular responsibilities, or if this is something we should address.

● (1550)

Mr. Michael Ferguson: I can't comment on it. How the government wants to approaches these types of services is government policy. Whether a government decides to put it in legislation or to deal with it in another way is up to the government to decide. It's not something I have a position on one way or the other.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Thank you.

Mr. Shugart.

Mr. Ian Shugart: As a public servant, of course, I would echo that. Other countries, comparable countries like the U.K., are in the same tradition of providing consular support to their citizens under what is called the royal prerogative, the ability of the crown to act in the interests of its citizens.

I do point out that it is long-standing policy of all governments to support this. I think this is truly a non-partisan expectation of parliamentarians. With regard to the service that we provide, as with everything in the department, we're accountable for it. That's why we're here today and in considerable detail, and we should be.

My last comment would be that I can think of no other situation where the individuality of circumstances is as pronounced as it is in consular services. That gives us a degree of flexibility that legislation and regulation can lack from time to time, as you know. We have mounted this consular service, which I agree with you is very effective by global standards, through the role of prerogative. Our intention is to make it as effective on that ground as we possibly can. That commitment would apply, whatever the legal ground for the service.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I appreciate the answer because for me it was a surprise. I do appreciate understanding why, and why the tradition has been maintained.

There is always, it seems, when Mr. Ferguson comes to us with his audits, the issue of data: how we capture it, how we use it, how we then put find a very effective way towards improving whatever has been found to be lacking. You gave a certain amount of numbers and percentages, but do you have any idea of how many Canadian travellers and expats actually register with missions when they are abroad?

Mr. Ian Shugart: That's a very good question and—before Heather answers—it varies widely. The reasons why Canadians do not register also vary widely.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Is one of the them that they don't know that there's a reasonably easy way online to register?

Mr. Ian Shugart: Undoubtedly, and we could do more. If the committee permits me to take advantage of this hearing to make the case to Canadians travelling and, in some cases, to the parents of students and others travelling, I will say that this service is available in all of our missions. We believe that it is very important, particularly in places that are somewhat more dangerous to visit and in situations where they may become ill, or where there's an accident, a natural disaster, or a local crisis. It can make an enormous difference in our consular officers' ability to help them proactively, as well as responsibly.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Before going into the details of the question, would this be something that IATA—I think IATA is the one that regulates airlines—could add to at least airplane tickets so that we would have a note saying, "Please register with your mission", or whatever it may be? It just seems so fundamental when you go abroad to put yourself under the cover of your own government and the protection of your own government.

● (1555)

Mr. Ian Shugart: We certainly strongly urge Canadians to do that, and I thank you for that question.

Heather, you might want to add numbers.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey (Assistant Deputy Minister, Consular, Emergency Management and Security, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Yes. Currently, we have about 220,000 Canadians who are registered with the registry of Canadians abroad. This is a small number relative to the millions who we know travel and reside abroad. One of the reasons that were given—and this has been part of some of the surveys that we have done to look at why Canadians would not register—is awareness. We are redoubling our efforts to have a targeted communications campaign with those travellers, including working with travel agents and other travel industry representatives to promote awareness.

Another one of them is that there are a lot of misperceptions about how that kind of data might be used by the government, that it might move, which is not the case. It's held according to the Privacy Act strictly for consular purposes.

The other reason, I would say, is that Canadians lack a full awareness of the kinds of services that this kind of registration could bring them. We send about 650 emergency advisories a year to those registrants. When there are local security incidents that we need to respond to, we use that contact information to reach out and alert Canadians of situations that might present a threat to their safety. We feel it's important, and it's part of our communication strategy to find more ways of reaching people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to the opposition side, Ms. Kusie.

Welcome to our committee.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

[*English*]

I am very proud to have been a management consular officer for over a decade at Global Affairs Canada, having served as our consul in both El Salvador as well as Dallas, Texas. I was in El Salvador under Madam Allard-Gomez at Dallas, Texas under Paula Caldwell St-Onge, and also on temporary duty in Argentina under Jamie Bell and Yves Gagnon. I am very proud to have a proud history with Global Affairs Canada.

I notice the audit report concluded that your department did not have the performance information necessary to ensure it adequately responded to requests for consular assistance from Canadians travelling or living abroad, as you indicated in your overview, Mr. Shugart. "Global Affairs Canada could not ensure that services were effective or appropriate"—that is a direct quote from the report.

Monsieur Shugart, I would be interested to know, how could this government not mandate these performance standards, leaving both your department, and more importantly, Canadians, vulnerable?

Mr. Ian Shugart: I think that, as the Auditor General said, we accept that finding, and in our management plan, we are putting in place measures to correct that.

I think the issue of performance data is one that is fairly widespread across government. I think it's a general problem that we have of focusing on doing the task and neglecting the data systems that will allow us to track and know with precision how well we are doing. It frequently takes the Auditor General and his team to bring this to our attention in precise areas.

That, Chair and members of the committee, is not an excuse. I think it is an explanation of a tendency across government departments. Resources typically go to addressing increases in volumes.

One of the concerns that was expressed was that we have not, more recently, reviewed the service standards so that they are in line with reasonable measures of performance, and we have committed to adjusting that as well.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Monsieur Shugart.

I am also very proud to have designed the critical paths for consular activity for Canadians on both the travel.gc.ca website and application. Canadians rely on these tools for safe travel abroad; however, the audit report also indicated that mandatory cyclical reviews of its online travel advice and advisories were not always completed on schedule.

Mr. Shugart, how could the government not mandate this critical task, leaving Canadians with incomplete information prior to making critical travel decisions, please?

● (1600)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: We were pleased that the audit report did find that, in response to crises or changes in a local context, the travel advice was updated. We maintain a 24-7 capacity here in Ottawa that is connected to situations on the ground. In the middle of the night or on the weekends, whenever events happen on the ground, the advice is updated and it is continually maintained in the local context.

Where we have fallen behind, and where the Auditor General pointed out we need to do better, is in the 18-month cyclical reviews, looking at each country in its holistic stage with all of the different pieces of advice to make sure there are no inconsistencies. We have, as a result, put in place additional capacity to ensure that we achieve that and reduce the backlog.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Madam Jeffrey.

On several occasions abroad I recall sitting with incarcerated Canadians in El Salvador, Paraguay, and Montevideo to ensure their basic needs were being met, and in some cases, a fair judicial process in court, yet the audit report indicates that Global Affairs Canada officers were not always able to contact Canadians who had been arrested or detained abroad within its service standards, and furthermore, case files often provided no explanation as to why no contact was made.

I do recognize, Monsieur Shugart, that it takes much time to enter the data after the fact of having performed the act, but it was also found that the level of consular assistance varied from one case to another and was not consistent.

Mr. Shugart, can Canadians feel safe abroad under this government, knowing the uncertainty that exists for timely assistance should they become incarcerated?

Mr. Ian Shugart: I think Canadians should feel reassured as a result of this audit, the department's response to it, and the facts we have tabled about our response to Canadians in detention, which represent the highest commitment—I would say—by not only this government but any Canadian government to meet their needs and respond to their situation.

You are quite right that there are gaps in the case files, sometimes because of the burdens consular officers face. The completion of the case file can be put aside while the management of the file is pursued with local authorities, and so on. It shouldn't be the case, in a perfect world, that the data would not be included in the file. I think it is a situation that naturally arises on the ground in the press of these situations.

We have responded to that by improving the training of consular officers. In a network as broad as ours and with the huge variety of circumstances Canadians will face, this is a significant undertaking to ensure that the discipline is consistent right across the network. That is our objective, though, and that is what we will be setting out to do.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kusie and Mr. Shugart.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We're pleased to have Mr. Garrison with us here today.

Mr. Garrison, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here today. I also thank Mr. Ferguson for the work that's been done on this audit.

While I agree with most Canadians that the general record of consular services is very good, I have to say that I am quite disturbed by the findings regarding the treatment of Canadians arrested or detained abroad. I actually think this is an unacceptable finding, and I say that as someone who, before becoming a member of Parliament, worked as an international human rights observer. I have done prison visits in Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Canada, and I have been in a position of advocating for improved treatment and negotiating release for those unlawfully detained.

Therefore, I actually find some of the things in this report, even though they're presented in very mild language, quite disturbing. When you say that we have, maybe, 1,600 arrested or detained in a given year, and that fewer than half are contacted within 24 hours, and that most of them are not contacted in person, that means we have over 1,000 Canadians at some point in the year who aren't contacted within 24 hours—which is the critical period in detentions.

As well, if you go further into the report, it says that in the sample, about 5% were not contacted at all, which would mean we'd have up to 80 Canadians during the year never being contacted by their government when in detention. I don't think this is a very good record.

My first questions are to Mr. Ferguson, about the study.

In your report, you focused on one part of the contact for those arrested, but in section 7.37 you talk about consular services also meaning informing family members, advocating for fair treatment, and advocating for general well-being. Did you study the record on those, or were you focused on merely the first step of that, which is contacting the Canadians who had been detained? I don't see the evidence of that in the report.

● (1605)

Mr. Michael Ferguson: I will actually ask Ms. McCalla to respond to that.

Ms. Carol McCalla (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): We did focus on the initial contact in 24 hours and then on the ongoing contact for those who were imprisoned for longer than a week.

In order for the consular officials to then make contact with the family members and advocate on their behalf, they are required to obtain consent. We looked at those cases to see whether the consent had been provided and what the detained people asked for. In some cases, they didn't want the consular officials to advocate on their behalf until perhaps they were released. We did, however, look to see that the consent was provided.

We did have trouble locating that in many files, and we did have to do a significant amount of follow-up with Global Affairs officials to get that documentation. Again, that speaks to the quality of the documentation in the case management file, and that this should be something that is regularly reviewed and the performance should be monitored by Global Affairs officials.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Of course I do accept that the priority has to be on examining those contacts in the first 24 hours because they are critical, but I can imagine a world in which you might do better in all the rest of the things, but it's not the most likely world that you would actually live in. If you don't do very well on the initial contact, I'm worried about the record on the rest of these things.

Did you find that the same service standard was being applied in all countries where people were being detained or arrested, despite the very large differences in the amount of risk that detentions and arrests would constitute in various countries? In other words, is there only one service standard?

Ms. Carol McCalla: There is only one service standard. The 24-hour contact is the same regardless of what region of the world you are arrested in. We looked to see whether they made reasonable efforts. In some cases they were denied access by the local government, but we looked to see that this was document in the file.

We found a troubling number of cases where the documentation wasn't there, so we didn't see and couldn't assume that they even tried to make contact. That was what we wanted to bring attention to, but we did note that in a third of the cases they did make the contact as required.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I do understand that it's difficult. I've been in a situation where the office we were waiting in had to be cleaned and all the furniture removed. We were told we would have to wait five hours, and at the end of the five hours, we were told there was no one in prison—all the cells were empty, and we were welcome to look—so I do understand that's not a simple task.

My concern is that we know that the risks of torture, maltreatment, and sometimes even just getting lost in the prison system are extremely high. I did interview people in Afghanistan who weren't sure why they were in prison, and no one could find their records. That's why it is so critical that we make that contact in those 24 hours.

I'm going to ask a question of the department. I find the recommendation in very polite language, very mildly stated, but the government's response is to say you're going to review the service standards. The problem is not with the service standards. The problem is with not meeting the service standards. It implies to me that you might say, "Well, since we don't contact them in 24 hours, we'll change that service standard." That would be a disturbing conclusion, and I'd like you to reassure me that it's not what you mean.

● (1610)

Mr. Ian Shugart: Chair, I can reassure the honourable member that this is not the intent. The point of that is the observation in the audit that those service standards have not been reviewed. We completely accept the important recommendation on documenting these visits. Again, it is by no means an excuse or evasion of that recommendation to highlight that the lack of documentation does not mean that efforts were not made by consular officials. It means that it isn't documented. That's why we need to do a better job across the board of documentation.

The point about the service standards is to have greater precision and realism on the circumstances. Those service standards need to be more reflective of the environment where we are operating so that in the future, as we are better able to track our performance, a future auditor general and auditors will not say, "There continues to be a gap between your service standard and performance." It is not lowering the denominator to an easier level. It is being more precise about the circumstances in countries to ensure that the service standards are precise and relevant to the circumstances.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shugart and Mr. Garrison.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Massé, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Rémi Massé (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the Auditor General and his team once more for presenting us with the key findings of this report so that we politicians can have some light shed on major problems that must be fixed in order to provide Canadians with an ever-increasing quality of service.

Thank you, Mr. Shugart, for being here as well. I would also like to thank the team supporting you with your testimony. I know that a lot of work goes into preparing for parliamentary committee meetings.

My first question is for you, Mr. Shugart. The content and findings of the Auditor General's report, as well as his message when presenting all of his reports, point to a culture in the federal public service that must change. I am extremely curious to hear you talk about the strategy you've implemented, or plan to implement, in order to share this report's findings with the public servants in your department. They would then be able to recognize the positive aspects, but also those in need of improvement, so that each person, team and sector in your department can commit to a plan to resolve certain issues. We can go into detail on certain issues later.

My question for you is: What is, or what will be, your strategy for sharing these aspects in order to improve the services provided by Global Affairs Canada?

Mr. Ian Shugart: Thank you for your question.

I'll let Ms. Jeffrey comment, but, first, I will say that our consular officers' training is the most important and most efficient way to improve that aspect of their performance. I was about to use the word "culture". It is a cultural issue insofar as we need to improve the discipline needed for preparing documents and evidence from the files, and all the other things we just talked about. I don't think that the cultural issue extends to the commitment of our consular officers, consular managers and heads of mission around the world, or to the way Canadians are provided with the most efficient services possible in specific circumstances.

In a few weeks—a few days, actually—one of my colleagues and I will personally meet with the members of the consular team here in Ottawa. I will encourage them to talk about their experiences, the internal challenges, the demands, the trends, all of their concerns, actually.

I have no doubt that our consular officers are committed to providing the best possible service. We have to give them the necessary tools, whether through communication or through training for prison visits, for example. We must help them provide the most admirable service possible.

● (1615)

Mr. Rémi Massé: Perhaps, in this context, there are tools that can be provided to consular officers.

In his report, the Auditor identified performance gaps in certain missions. He noted that four of the ten missions with the highest volume of work did not meet their performance targets. These performance targets are to deliver at least 90% of passports—we are talking about passports—within 20 days.

We know that there have been administrative changes affecting Canadian citizens wishing to travel. For example, issuing the Electronic Travel Authorization has brought about tremendous pressure. When we compare these 10 missions, we see, for example, that the Hong Kong mission went very smoothly and met its performance targets, but the London one showed much poorer performance.

In your opinion, how can a mission like the one in London not meet its performance targets, when compared to the one in Hong Kong? I especially want to know which corrective measures have been implemented to make things right.

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In terms of the performance standards on the delivering of passports within the 20-day standard, there is variation amongst our missions abroad. We've seen that the way we had resourced and staffed those missions was not agile enough to take into account the surges we saw. We know that with the introduction of the 10-year passport there now will be periodic peaks and valleys in passport demand abroad, and we have to adjust.

We've begun to already adjust our resourcing system so that we can respond with additional surge capacity. We're moving to a multi-year agreement with IRCC that will allow us to put in place longer-term resources to adapt to peaks and valleys, with surge capacity for summer staffing and other peak travel periods when we know that passport demand is going to surge.

In some missions they had enough capacity to redirect to try to absorb, and in some cases they moved that capacity from other types of services that they might have been providing. What we found in general is that it was more difficult abroad to have enough flexibility because of trying to find bilingual, trained people to deliver passport services, which are so important and need to be done in a rigorous way. We've put in place a new system to try to do that because we know that from now on, apart from eTA, there are going to be fluctuations in demand and our system needs to be more flexible.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Massé.

Before we go to Mr. Nuttall, I'm wondering if you can give Canadians out there who are viewing this or who may want to come back to this.... We've talked about members of Parliament getting the call from family members. I've received that call on Christmas Eve or during the Christmas holidays. If you have a difficult time responding within 24 hours, are you always being notified within 24 hours?

Typically what we will ask families of someone who has been incarcerated abroad.... They'll say, "Mr. Sorenson, we have no idea what to do. Your office is closed. I'm sorry we called you at home." We will ask, then, if they have contacted consular services. Sometimes their expectation is that because he's been arrested and incarcerated, consular services are the first to be notified.

Maybe you could just give us a bit of the process there. What should someone do? Are you notified immediately? Do you have someone on call within 24 hours? You haven't seen him, but have you always been notified?

● (1620)

Mr. Ian Shugart: That's a great question, because again it gives us an opportunity to reinforce a couple of pointers here. You're absolutely right that individuals in distress don't always know what the right avenue is, and the truth is that we are not always immediately informed.

Members of Parliament, as in the case that you give, Chair, are very well aware. Typically, at both constituency and Ottawa levels, staff in the offices of members of Parliament know about our emergency watch centre and so on. That contact is often made, but often not in the first instance.

Heather, maybe you could give a quick summary of what happens when that call comes in.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Our 24-7 emergency watch centre is staffed with consular officers around the clock. In terms of all the calls that come in after hours—if it's in the middle of the night in Thailand, for example—those calls are routed to Ottawa. They're answered. If it's necessary, the watch officers wake up the consular officers on the ground and then we begin our efforts to try to locate the Canadian.

When we refer to notification, there are two ways. Sometimes it's family members of Canadians who inform us that their family member has been detained. In other cases, certainly, we expect host governments to inform us when they detain a Canadian national. It's part of their responsibilities under the Vienna convention, as it is for us here in Canada. Not all countries, local offices, or police stations understand or respect those responsibilities. In many cases, it can take a long time for us to find out exactly where in the prison system the Canadian might be located. It can be a complex task, and we rely on all the information we can get to try to triangulate and reach people as quickly as possible.

The watch centre and that emergency officer should be the first port of call. They can access everyone they need to in order to reach people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Moving to the second round of questioning, which is a five-minute round, we have Mr. Nuttall.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall (Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us today to both respond to and provide more information regarding the audit that was completed by the Auditor General and his team.

I want to ask a couple of follow-up questions and then go from there. The comments just today from the Auditor General start out with a couple of things that were done at least to par and at least within the expectations that people would have, and then they bridge into the timing at which Canadians who are held abroad perhaps have to live with or live without in terms of being contacted by one of our consular representatives. The first question probably should be to the Auditor General and then I'll go back over.

Mr. Auditor General, when you say that detained Canadians were not contacted within 24 hours, is there a way to determine whether they were tried to be contacted, or was there no way to actually measure if there was any emphasis put on that by our people on the ground?

Mr. Michael Ferguson: Actually, what we found in 70 of the 190 cases was that the consular staff did contact the detained person within 24 hours. In 10 cases there was no evidence that they ever contacted the individual. In the other 110 cases, they didn't contact the individual within 24 hours, but in about a half of those cases they had documented that they had tried to get hold of them within 24 hours. Out of the 190, I guess you could look at it as 70 cases where they actually did contact them and 55 cases where they tried to contact them, and they documented the fact that they had tried to contact them.

● (1625)

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: Thank you.

To Mr. Shugart and Ms. Jeffrey, the measurables are in place here of what your goals are to contact detained individuals. You have those internal expectations that you clearly communicated to your staff on the ground. How often did you use the information to either retrain or retool or move resources around? I'm not talking about in the case of a surge, maybe like what was happening in Honduras about 10 years ago, but just on a consistent basis. How often are we using information that you have to better prepare our people on the ground?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: We are consistently using, at multiple points through the year, a resourcing model that we have that measures different kinds of demand and service standards and reallocates surge resources to those locations to try to meet increases in demand. That isn't just in the extreme cases like in an emergency crisis response where we have a dedicated core of responders, but also for more mundane types of surges related to particular travel patterns.

What the Auditor General has pointed out to us is that our resourcing model needs probably better quality data in many cases to be able to accurately measure that kind of performance target and make sure that we are providing resources where they are necessary. As a result, we're going to be revisiting that resourcing model and looking at more sophisticated indicators and tracking better quality data, and part of that is training. It's about communicating with our officers the importance not just of assisting that Canadian who desperately needs help, but in recording all the steps that were taken to do that.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: I have a problem specifically with just talking about the data, and I know I was talking about that. So it's 70 out of 190 cases, I think the Auditor General said, and I could be exaggerating the number slightly. That's not like a data miss in terms of our not using the data correctly to determine where we needed to be. That's a much more widespread issue.

Is there a funding issue? These are very important services that Canadians travelling in all parts of the world, but specifically in some hot regions, need to know are there for them.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, there is an aspect of it that is a data issue. In many countries it is not possible to access Canadians, for example, in certain kinds of immigration detention or in certain places. In many cases, our officers were not documenting on the file when there were systemic issues that would prevent them from having access. They knew the local context so they wouldn't necessarily document the reasons why it was not possible to reach that person.

Not having the data means that we as the managers of the program can't effectively move resources where they need to be. That's why we need to do better on that.

The majority of our detention cases are actually in the United States, which is not surprising given that's where Canadians frequently travel. We do try to look at resourcing in terms of the much more complex nature of the interactions in a place like Afghanistan or in other insecure areas where visiting detention requires a lot more effort and you have to travel long distances.

Not all cases are created equal. Our system needs to be more sensitive to the kinds of demands that vary between regions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Nuttall, we'll come back to you.

Mr. Lefebvre, please.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Shugart, for being here again, in a different capacity.

I have a quick question for Mr. Ferguson.

When was the last audit of the consular services? I didn't see that in the report. Sometimes you put it in; sometimes you don't.

Ms. Carol McCalla: We had not previously done an audit on consular services.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: This is the first audit on consular services. Okay.

Ms. Carol McCalla: Yes.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Thank you.

In paragraph 7.3 of the audit, it states that there has been an increase of around 21% of Canadians travelling abroad, which has created more demand on consular services. This was in 2015, so from 2005 to 2015 there was an increase.

Are you aware if there was a budget allocation to the consular services to address this increase, Mr. Shugart?

Mr. Ian Shugart: I don't believe there was a targeted increase. There was no formal, purpose-oriented budget increase that I'm aware of.

We could certainly.... Do you know offhand?

● (1630)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: There has been a gradual increase in the cost of consular services being provided. Consular services are provided on demand. In our annual reporting to Treasury Board, you can see that there has been a consistent increase in cost.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: In the cost, but is it also in the budget as well?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, that comes from the reference levels of the department.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Okay. Thank you.

This is with respect to a theme we've heard from Mr. Garrison and Mr. Massé regarding Canadian individuals being detained abroad. The concern that I share with my colleagues is that the Auditor General's opening words advise us that in 2004, Justice Dennis O'Connor made the investigation with respect to the Arar matter.

In his report from 2004, he recommended that Global Affairs Canada train its staff to identify signs of torture and mistreatment and inform the minister as quickly as it arises. I'm looking at your recommendations, Mr. Ferguson, in the response. This is 2004 and we are now in 2018. The audit was from 2016-17. Basically it says that the response from the department, after being recommended by the Auditor General, was that more training be provided.

The response from the department says the department has already piloted and has a training program. It says, "A process will also be put in place to ensure that officers are fully trained, including in arrest and detention cases."

We're looking at 14 years after a report came out to say that we should be better training the consular officers across the world.

Why do we have this gap? Why is this a recurring theme? Why is this still a problem today, 14 years after a report has come out telling you to address this?

Mr. Ian Shugart: First, I can't comment on that whole intervening period.

Secondly, Justice O'Connor's report certainly had an impact. It was a widely known. Its implications were very clear. There would have been on the ground much greater attention given by consular officers to the issues that Justice O'Connor raised.

I think the difficulty, from the point of view of an assurance audit, is that in the absence of a formal training initiative, the conclusion arrived at is a logical one. What we've emphasized is that we have already begun to implement and to pilot formal training in this area. We will be rolling out formally, across the network, that kind of precise training.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Thank you.

I have only a few seconds left.

How can we ensure that this will be ongoing, that this is not a one-time "We've been told to do this. We're going to do it, and after that we're done"? How can we have confidence that you will implement this in your department, in consular services, as a recurring training that should happen every—you guys decide it—18 months, 30 months, whatever is required to ensure that this is constant? There's turnover of personnel, I'm assuming, just like everywhere else, so how can we ensure this will be addressed and will not arise again?

Mr. Ian Shugart: Management and consular officer formal training is an annual event in the department. This training program will become a formal part of that annual training. It will be going on in a few weeks. We're engaged in formal training of our outgoing heads of mission currently, last week and this week, and CO training comes immediately after that. Our training program will be available for scrutiny in that regard at any time.

The Chair: Thank you.

I just have a follow up—and again, I can steal from Mr. Nuttall's time because he's from my party. I would never do that on the other side. He asks about the training, and you talk about it. Does Global Affairs Canada have an internal audit process? Consular services has never been under a full audit by our Auditor General prior to this. Do you have adequate internal audit processes?

● (1635)

Mr. Ian Shugart: Yes, we certainly do, Chair.

And I don't think you've stolen from Mr. Nuttall. I think maybe it's a repayable loan.

We have internal audit and evaluation. In fact, we've had an evaluation of the consular service done within the last year and that is posted on our website. Internal audit in departments is under the authority of the deputy minister. Currently we do not have an internal audit on the consular program, but it would be a fair subject. I don't think we would do it in light of the work the Auditor General has just done. The standing committee of the House is also doing a study on the consular program. As I said, we did an evaluation of the program, which is now publicly available.

The Chair: Just so I understand this, Global Affairs has an internal audit process but not one specifically for consular services.

Mr. Ian Shugart: That's correct.

The Chair: Do you think that would be a possibility? If you've had an internal audit prior to this, and it reaches somehow into consular services, were any of the concerns that the Auditor General brought out in his report recognized prior to his report?

Mr. Ian Shugart: I would have to check to see if consular services has been the subject of internal audit. I can tell you that the evaluation we did of the program...and evaluations are different from audits, as the committee knows. They don't have the same assurance element, but in many respects they're similar in that they often find the same things. There is a great correlation between what we found in the evaluation completed earlier this year and what the Office of the Auditor General identified in its report.

The Chair: I would think that, not so much on the detention, but on the torture.... One concern the Auditor General brought out was that the timeline isn't adequate. I think he said in his report that in some cases where there may have been torture involved, you were deficient in getting information to the minister—or in some cases, the deputy minister—on time. Over the last few years, we've seen payouts to those who have undergone torture in other jurisdictions. If not for humanitarian reasons, certainly just given the payouts we've had there should be a little more internal auditing to keep track of this and get the data moving on.

Anyway, we can come back to that.

I'll now go to Mr. Nuttall.

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I actually want to continue down the road we were going on before, if it's okay to kind of switch back.

If the numbers are showing something as widespread as what's been reported in the audit, the thing I love about this committee and about auditing is that usually the numbers don't lie. You can really tell a lot. You've said, Mr. Shugart, that you're starting to institute department-wide training to deal with this. Is this training aimed at the front line? Is it aimed at support services in the background? Is there at least dual custody in place for each and every person whom consular affairs or whoever it is on the ground is helping?

Mr. Ian Shugart: The training will be very comprehensive. It will apply to all consular officers. You understand that the circumstance varies widely in our missions. We have some very small missions. We have countries where the ambassador is not actually resident. He or she is accredited to that country and the mission presence is not there; it's in the other nearby country. Then we go all the way through to the major sites. Of course we, over time and in collaboration with our heads of mission, allocate consular resources appropriately. The increased data that we've committed ourselves to providing will help us to make more precise allocation of resources. Heather referred to that earlier.

The population covered by the training, either at mission or in headquarters, will be complete coverage to our consular offices. We want them all to have this specialized training, for example, on prison visits, which is very precise to that circumstance, as well as updated general training on all consular issues.

● (1640)

Mr. Alexander Nuttall: The problem is that, if you take the Auditor General's numbers—and I'm going off the top of my head here just recalling—if you take 70 and then you take another half of the remainder, there's 10 that never got contacted, and you take roughly half of them, which you said were not documented, even at that point you end up with 120 out of 190, 66%. It's just a low number. I'm not sure that training is necessarily the answer here. What I'm trying to get at is what the answer is, because with every single audit that's done, the department comes in and says, "Oh, we're instituting that; we're dealing with it already". I think that's the way the process should work and hopefully it's not just lip service and there's actually action to follow.

Where I get concerned in audits is when the responses to them don't match actually the results that we've seen to date, because it may move it 5% or 10%. In some of these cases, the wrong case at the wrong time is a Canadian citizen in harm's way, severe harm's way, and that's what we're dealing with. What else is going to happen to fix this?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, I can answer that. You're right, there are a couple of different parts to it. One is training, and that's training offered not just at headquarters but also abroad. This is specialized training in targeted missions where there are particular issues of mistreatment, and also online training and cyclical training. The audit found that 96% of our staff had been trained, but the problem is that our consular officers in particular spend large portions of their career abroad—they're not back in Ottawa—so we need to be more flexible in how we offer that training.

It isn't enough, however, just to have the front-line staff trained. Part of it is documentation, and part of that is refreshers on the kinds of things to look for, as well as the monitoring capacity at headquarters. This is a program that has a management capacity at headquarters. Our systems are not as modern as they should be, and we're in the process of upgrading them to provide the data and reporting and the real-time red flags that will pull up anomalies in the system, that will pull up patterns, and that will allow us to generate the kinds of analytics that we need to be able to have oversight happening across the world.

Right now in the two-year period, as we undergo this modernization, which has already begun, we will be putting on additional resources. We'll be doing sampling, monitoring, looking at the data put into the system, and doing it on an annual basis to ensure that this situation doesn't recur.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Arya.

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank Mr. Shugart and his departmental officials for the excellent work they did yesterday. Yesterday, the Air Canada flight from New Delhi to Toronto made an emergency landing in Moscow. Some of my constituents' families were on the plane and they were a bit concerned. They contacted me and I contacted the department. The way the department handled it and kept the lines of communication open to us was quite good. There was good work done.

I have a question regarding permanent residents. Do they have the same access to services in various missions abroad?

● (1645)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Consular services apply to Canadian citizens, so permanent residents are not recipients of the same kinds of services. However, in cases of crises, emergency, or where there are humanitarian considerations under way, we do our utmost to help.

Mr. Chandra Arya: A permanent resident constituent of mine, a Dutch citizen, when he went to the mission at The Hague, was turned away at the gate. His problem was that he had forgotten to take his permanent residency card and he couldn't come back. When he went to the mission there, the guards at the gate did not allow him to go forward. Is that normal?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Consular services are provided to Canadian citizens, not to PRs. I would have to look into what the process would be for a permanent resident who needed to access documentation. It is a separate process, one that is treated in a different way.

Mr. Chandra Arya: I think if we could expand that, put on the website what a permanent resident can do in case they lose their document, it would be quite good.

Mr. Shugart, you mentioned that 2.8 million Canadians currently live outside Canada. Where do you find the biggest concentration? That is close to 8% of our population, which is very huge. In which parts of the world do you think these numbers are concentrated?

Mr. Ian Shugart: The United States would be the single largest. Sometimes that living is short term and sometimes it's long term, but I don't know.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Okay, let me cut to the chase. We can understand the Canadians who have worked all their lives here, who have paid their taxes, and who retire in the United States or the Caribbean. We can understand that. The people who go abroad to work or study or who want to retire abroad, that we can also understand. But what is the number of those Canadians who are "Canadians of convenience", who came here, took citizenship, got their passport, and went back to whichever place they came from? How many do you think are included in this 2.8 million?

Mr. Ian Shugart: I could not estimate that off the top of my head.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Would you have a guesstimate?

Mr. Ian Shugart: No, I don't want to guess. I think that's a serious question. We also have to be careful, from a statistical point of view, on the definition. Citizenship is granted through a serious process. I wouldn't be qualified to make a distinction between those who are citizens for one set of reasons and those who are citizens for another. A more refined understanding of that—

Mr. Chandra Arya: Let me put it this way. When you have a plan, let's say in a place like Florida where a lot of citizens spend their winter months, and you can expect the kinds of services they require, the workload there, you'll staff positions appropriately. I think you'll do the same thing with other southern countries where people go to vacation, but are there countries where, in your plan, you have to staff depending on the number of Canadians living there, whether they are there temporarily or for the long term?

Mr. Ian Shugart: We would take the circumstances and past volumes into account to predict what current and future volumes would be. A number of factors would go into that.

Mr. Chandra Arya: There has to be a source for this 2.8 million number. What kind of source was it? Where can we find more in-depth data on this?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arya.

You can finish your answer.

Mr. Ian Shugart: We can follow up with some further detail on that and give you what we know by way of a breakdown into categories, but to us, a citizen is a citizen. We will give them the service they require.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

For any questions today that you are going to look into a little more, I would encourage you to email or write back to our clerk so that we'll be certain to get that information before we go into our study.

Mr. Garrison, please.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to return to the question of service standards for Canadians who are arrested or detained abroad.

I think for those who might be listening in, and for the record, it's important to note that a lot of times these are not tourists. These are people who have business in those countries, or they're visiting families. From my own experience as an MP, I've had more problems among business people and people visiting their families than among tourists, even though we do have the occasional drunk driver in Hawaii who gets detained. I think it's important to remember that sometimes people don't have a choice about travel, either for business reasons or for family reasons. They need to travel and they need consular services as a result.

When we say that people are usually not visited in person, if you are looking at revising the service standard, might there not be a case for saying that...? Maybe the most diplomatic way is for the default to be that we attempt to see people in person, unless the country is on a list where we haven't had problems. I know you would want to create a list of countries that cause problems.

It's a concern to me, given my own experience of how those in charge of people in custody can manipulate the situation so that those people cannot communicate with you or cannot communicate their real situation through an email or even a phone call. It's very difficult.

Would we give consideration to having a different service standard, based on the risk of detention in those countries? Again, I would suggest we do it by rewarding the good rather than labelling the bad.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The current standards for visiting Canadians in detention vary according to region. For example in the United States, which has a particular set of prison standards, the standard is 12 months, whereas in another region we would visit every three months. We have three-, six-, and 12-month service standards, according to the region.

One of the things the Auditor General found in his report was that there was a variation in service standards and insufficient documentation provided about why that variation existed. We would agree that it's very important to document the reasons, but there are also good reasons to have variation in standards.

There are cases where individuals are very vulnerable because of the nature of their offence, because of the persons they are, whom they know, and where they are being detained. As a result, they need much more intensive consular intervention than someone in a prison system where rule of law is entrenched and where we are confident that rule of law will be respected in their treatment.

Yes, we do have that, and that would be part of their view of the service standards, to make sure we are taking into account areas where Canadians might find themselves in greater difficulty.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Is that for follow-up visits?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes.

Mr. Randall Garrison: It's not for the initial contact.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: No. I think it is important to have that initial contact so we understand the full range of circumstances. It's often not possible to know that from a paper file. It is important to have a conversation with that individual to hear what their experience has been.

Mr. Randall Garrison: The default is that we would attempt to have personal contact with all of those people, because we're not doing that.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In some cases, where you're confident that you can have a telephone conversation and that standards will be respected to allow that person to have a frank discussion with you, then I think we could look at that. That is certainly the practice, for example, in a place like the United States, where we have large numbers of these meetings.

Mr. Randall Garrison: That's the suggestion I was making.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: That is already the practice, but we would look at making sure that our service standards outline that clearly, so that Canadians have expectations about what service they can expect.

Mr. Ian Shugart: Part of that specialized training on mistreatment is to give the consular officers the background, the information, the signs, the clues, that there may be mistreatment going on. It's very specialized, as you know.

Mr. Randall Garrison: The very fact of being detained quite often has very severe consequences for people if they're doing business, or for people who have children—

Mr. Ian Shugart: Yes.

Mr. Randall Garrison: —and have child care arrangements that get disrupted. There are some very severe consequences, even if it's not from direct mistreatment while in custody.

I was very happy to hear you mention the different circumstances of people, because obviously some Canadians are more vulnerable when they're travelling. I belong to that category, as a gay man. There are 74 countries where I don't visit. I try very carefully not to visit there, but not all members of my community are that—I would call it—sensible or aware of their situations.

Do you know, if a person is a member of the LGBT community, that different standards would be applied when they've been arrested or detained?

● (1655)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: We have specialized travel advice for different types of communities that might find themselves in a particular context where they should be alert for potential threats to their safety or well-being. That can include young people travelling in some places, elderly, LGBTQ. There are jurisdictions where the rule of law as we have in Canada and respect for human rights are not observed.

We have that advice. One of the recommendations of the audit is that we look for ways to provide that to people in a more targeted way. It needs to be part of the documentation in our case system where particular vulnerabilities or threats arise, and what that means for the level of service and monitoring that those individuals should continue to receive. It needs to be a much more tailored response, but in a documented way.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The time is up.

We'll now move to Mr. Chen, please.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by thanking Deputy Minister Shugart and his team for their work. It's a tremendous undertaking to ensure the consistency and care that is provided to Canadians when they are abroad, oftentimes dealing with very time-consuming, complex situations regarding their health, well-being, and safety.

I want to thank the Auditor General and his team for pointing out some great areas in which we can do better.

I want to ask a question with respect to some numbers that were shared with us today. The deputy minister mentioned that in 2016, 52 million trips were made abroad by Canadians, and that represented an increase of 4% for the past 10 years. In the Auditor General's report, paragraph 7.3, the AG makes reference to 55 million trips abroad by Canadians in 2015, and points out that's a 21% increase from 10 years ago. I know we're looking at different years, but I would have suspected that the jump recorded in 2015 and 2016 over 10 years would be similar.

I'm not sure who wants to tackle this, but one is 4% and one is 21%.

Ms. Carol McCalla: That's the data that we had, and we confirmed it with Global Affairs on the number of visits abroad in that year. We didn't look more recently at 2016 data, but we verified it with public information available on site.

Mr. Ian Shugart: Chair, I'm happy to review that and give the members clarification.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you very much.

Moving on to the cost of providing consular services, the Auditor General noted that a service fee was set in 1995, of $25. That fee has not changed.

Generally speaking, when it comes, for example, to applying and getting a passport at one of the Canadian missions abroad, there is a built-in service fee, a cost recovery, and that is to ensure that the cost of service is being charged to those who are accessing the service.

Why has that fee not been changed since 1995?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: As you know, the Auditor General found that we should be reviewing the fee. It is part of the fee that is charged within the overall passport fee, so we'll be working with IRCC and with Treasury Board as part of the review process that the Auditor General has recommended.

The cost of consular services is funded only in part through that fee, and in part through the reference levels of the department, in combination. The consular services that are being provided have not been constrained by the limitation of that fee remaining the same, but it is appropriate to review how we're going to resource the program effectively going forward, given what we see in terms of future projections of the demand for services.

● (1700)

Mr. Shaun Chen: Absolutely. I'm hearing that with more people travelling—4%, 21%, but certainly an increase—there's a pressure and demand on the services that government provides to Canadians abroad. It's very important for us to be able to ensure that fees are aligned with the services that are being received.

When I look at exhibit 7.5 on page 21 of the AG's report, there is a chart that shows revenues from consular fees, as well as the cost of consular services, and there is a steep projected decline that will occur over the next three years in projected revenue from consular fees. What is that projection based on? I'm hearing at the same time that there is going to be a look at what fees are being collected. How is that data being extrapolated?

Mr. Ian Shugart: I think, as a general proposition, governments and government departments have a fairly high bar to achieve when they raise fees. Canadians would prefer smaller fees and I think the government is sensitive to that. It has to be justified by the data. I think part of the conclusion of the audit is that we have not had the kind of data that we've been able to apply, hence the new methodology and the data to support it.

Do you want to comment on that projection? I think that's just a divergence of volumes and current revenue.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes. I believe the projection comes from the fact that the consular service fee of $25 has remained the same, irrespective of whether it was a five-year or a 10-year passport that was issued. The move to the majority of Canadians taking on passports for 10 years leads to a significant reduction in the revenues, because that $25 fee is being collected only every 10 years instead of every five years. That results in the decline that you see.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Could the Auditor General comment on that?

Mr. Michael Ferguson: That explanation is right. It's the move from the five-year to the 10-year passport. As more Canadians move to a 10-year passport, and the $25 fee is only charged at the time of obtaining the passport, that creates that large dip in revenues. You see in the chart, as well, that afterwards the revenues will start to go back up again.

Mr. Shaun Chen: We need to be very thoughtful in how we approach this, moving forward, because there is an existing divergence between cost and revenue that is further exacerbated by the fact that individuals now have passports that have a longer validity period. That means that your revenues from those folks—unless they lose their passports—will be significantly decreased.

I know you're working on a plan, but have you given any thought to that exacerbated effect in terms of revenue versus cost?

Mr. Ian Shugart: That will be the object of the exercise—not just that issue, to account for volumes, and so on, but on the specific fee. In effect, I think we'll have to agree with Treasury Board on what is a business model for that service to Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go back to Ms. Kusie, please.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm very fortunate to have spent a year in that operation centre on A2. I remember watching the sun come up over the river several times.

[*Translation*]

I would also like to take the time to thank all consular officers around the world.

[*English*]

Heather, I must say I think you have the most difficult job in the department without question.

As a former officer of the platform branch and management consular officer, I understand the mission budgeting process across the mission network. It was concluded in the audit report that mission resources, as you mentioned, Mr. Shugart, were not aligned with workloads to ensure an effective, consistent level of services to Canadians abroad.

Mr. Shugart, how is it that consular service standards were not made clear by this government in an effort for your department to appropriately distribute resources across missions?

● (1705)

Mr. Ian Shugart: Allocation of resources across missions is a complicated issue. Consular services would be only one element of that. Missions, as you know, have a wide variety of responsibilities, and this is one of them. I think what we will be able to do on the consular side...but even that will not capture all of the costs of missions. It will be to give us predictability and that close relationship between demand and the resources and the same business-like approach to all of the other requirements of missions, not all of which, of course, can be documented, predicted, and defined.

To the best of our ability, we allocate resources on the basis of a number of criteria: the number of people who are coming through, the existence of trade missions, of political engagement with the government in question, and so forth. It's a complicated process, but this will address at least one major part of it.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much.

My next question is section 7.12 recognizes the Canadian consular service charter. I'm wondering when was this created, and who it was created by. My follow-up question to those questions would be in regard to the passenger bill of rights, and where this document is at. Certainly while individuals should be able to rely upon the government, there comes a point when they must take personal responsibility for their travels abroad. Regarding that, at what point or where is the passenger bill of rights?

In addition to my first two questions, when was the Canadian consular service charter created, and by whom was it created, please?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'll have to get back to you with the date of when it was created, but it was created by Global Affairs Canada in consultation with stakeholders to provide greater clarity about the list of services that Canadians could expect as part of the consular service. Sorry, the other question you had was about the....

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: The second one was in regard to the passenger bill of rights.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The approach we've taken to communicating with Canadians is to look at the kinds of information that they will need in order to travel safely abroad, the kinds of services they can avail themselves of, and the kinds of information that they should factor into their travel decisions to allow them to have the safest and best travel experience that they can.

This is a communication effort in terms of providing up-to-date information on local context in an effort to provide preventative consular advice to Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

Now we have Ms. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a very quick question—and it is a personal one.

In May of 2015, my daughter and her family were in Europe and they lost their passports. My son-in-law doesn't really matter in this issue, because he was not a Canadian citizen, but my daughter and my grandson were—and this was a seven-month-old child.

They went to the Canadian embassy to get replacements and it ended up costing them close to $1,000, for my daughter and my grandson. When they arrived back in Canada, they had to replace them again. Then my daughter had to replace it again two years later because they wouldn't give her a permanent passport until she produced proof of citizenship. I had no idea where her citizenship card was. She was two and a half months old when she became a citizen. She was born abroad but I was a Canadian citizen, so she did have a Canadian citizenship card. I had lost it.

Anyway, just to make the story short, it ended up costing a fortune to replace those two passports, and I really don't understand why. Nobody was ever capable of explaining to me what those charges were for. As far as I know, it's still going on, that it costs five to six times the cost of a normal passport to replace the passport abroad.

● (1710)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm not familiar with the exact fee, so I'll have to get back to the committee about what the fee structure is for replacement and emergency passports abroad. Global Affairs Canada is a service provider for Passport Canada in terms of the provision of passports abroad. Domestically it is done by Service Canada under IRCC, which is the program authority. The fees are set, and we administer those on behalf of IRCC abroad.

I'm not familiar with the details of that case, but I will look into the fee structure and get back to the committee.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: It's not about that specific case. It's whether it is still the norm that when a Canadian needs a passport replaced it costs them five times or six times the normal passport fee. I find that just outrageous. It's enormous.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'll have to look into what the exact fee structure is.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: As much as I do find the $25 consular fee too low, I do find this really quite outrageous.

Those are my questions, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you. I think it's a good lesson for all of us that the passport is a precious item and the loss of that passport.... There's just a whole range of things that people do with a lost or stolen passport. Yes, I think the fees still seem a little high, but it would be good information to at least know, although it's not fully your department. I recognize that.

Mr. Garrison, go ahead, please.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have two questions that are quite unrelated. The first one goes back to a question that was raised earlier about the gap that the Auditor General's report found in reporting torture or mistreatment in a timely manner to the minister. We do know and I've had the personal experience that sometimes ministers can privately fix situations with other governments simply by talking to their representatives. Whether or not that's always the case is one reason why timely delivery of that information can be quite crucial. I wonder whether in the audit there was any indication of a cause for those big delays.

As well, to the department, what's being done about that?

Ms. Carol McCalla: We looked at the 15 cases in which allegations of torture or mistreatment were made during our audit period. In some cases we found that they would first need to assess the credibility, and we found that it ranged from a couple of months to six months for that assessment to be made. In most cases it was because they needed time to gather the information, and in some regions it took time to gain access to the detainee and they had to work through the foreign government to be able to do that.

According to Global Affairs' policy, it will only formally inform the minister when there is a credible case that it is likely that torture has occurred. I was very encouraged to hear that the department is now moving to inform the minister when an allegation is made.

What came out of the Maher Arar case was that it is important for the minister to be informed and to thereby be able to make decisions about what action could be taken, because it is very serious when a Canadian abroad is mistreated or there is likelihood that torture has occurred.

Mr. Ian Shugart: I would add that part of this is a question of written formal notice to the minister. I can assure the committee that in many, many situations in the absence of a formal notification, oral information is provided to the minister. From a documentary point of view, it is clearly a better state of affairs to have that documented. That's important and we will be doing that, but again the audit team was able only to deal with documentary proof for an assurance audit.

We have regular briefings with the minister's staff in order to review consular cases. Any situations of alleged mistreatment or torture would be high on that list and the minister would be informed. But the fact that it is oral is not adequate, and that will be documented.

● (1715)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

That concludes....

Did you have one more? I'm sorry, go ahead.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I have just one more. It's my chance to be positive here.

In the last Parliament, I did make a request to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to add specific advice to the travel advisories for the LGBTQ community, and I wanted to commend the department for moving very quickly to do that. I do periodically check and the advice that's displayed there is accurate and timely, so I want to thank the department for doing that.

I have two small things to say about it, one is that you have to be pretty good at the website to get to that advice. Because it's in drop-down menus it's a little bit obscure and I wonder if the department could look at perhaps making it a bit more prominent, because it's very good information and again I congratulate them on this.

The second thing is very specific to the FIFA World Cup. There have been very explicit threats made publicly in Russia against the LGBTQ community, saying that these fans will not be welcome at the cup, that they will be attacked. In your travel advisory it's not mentioned in the World Cup part of it, even though those threats have been very high profile and very public. It's left to the general advice on Russia.

What I'm trying to say is that you're doing a good job.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would thank all of you for attending today. As a committee we are taken by this last...it was almost like a wake-up call to, not our committee but it should be to the public service. We go through this Auditor General's report and then, not so much just looking at the report regarding consular services but Mr. Shugart, as a deputy minister, I think there were other things in his report, and more specifically in his message, that if I were a deputy minister I would be paying very close attention to.

Although it originally refers to the Phoenix pay system and first nations, indigenous groups, he talks about "incomprehensible failure" in some cases of governments to deliver. He also speaks about the culture of government, which is the departments. This is not the culture of the government that's in power. This is the government, the federal bureaucracy and public service.

In former Auditor General's reports he has talked about not delivering the results that we really expect for Canadians and how the focus sometimes is on the short term but not the long term, so that Canadians can be benefited. We're pleased when we see that you have an action plan. We're pleased when we see incremental, first of all, acceptance of his report and then movement in your action plan. I would just encourage you to take that action plan, as I know....

Mr. Shugart, you've appeared here before in other capacities and we've appreciated it, but I would really encourage you to take the concerns expressed by our Auditor General about the culture of government and in some cases.... He talks about cases where, under the Phoenix system and indigenous systems, sometimes ministers were not adequately given the information in a timely process. To a lesser degree it may be pointed out here. I would certainly encourage you to take that message that he gives very seriously as we, not only in your department but in all departments, seek to better the culture of government.

That, I can tell you, is the goal of our committee, to enhance the culture of government and to be certain that Canadians are, first of all, served well.

We thank you for the way you that you serve.

I see you want to make a—

Mr. Ian Shugart: Could I make a short comment here on that last commentary?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Ian Shugart: The Auditor General knows my personal and professional respect for him. I won't comment on the Phoenix audit. That's out of my swim lane, but I could indicate that I have had the experience of successful major projects and unsuccessful major projects. There are a wide variety of reasons for both. The delivery, for example, of the automatic enrolment of old age security recipients was a very successful project, a major one.

I can tell the committee, through you, Chair, that under both governments I have personally had the experience many times of giving ministers unwelcome advice and welcome advice, good news and bad. That is our responsibility, and deputy ministers are very well aware of that. It is not always a comfortable responsibility to carry, but we do understand and, in my experience, follow that basic responsibility to tell the truth to our political masters, to follow their direction but to tell them the truth and give them our very best advice. We will apply that commitment in this particular case, as in all others.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Shugart. We would expect nothing less, and we appreciate that answer.

We are now going to suspend. We have 10 minutes remaining. We're going to move into a very short period of committee business, so we will suspend and allow our guests to exit the room.

Thank you for your testimony today and for the answers to our questions.

We're suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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